

TITLE: Observations on Bangladesh
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LOCATION: Dacca, Bangladesh
DATE: October 11 1973
ROLE/OCCASION: Commencement of autumn campaign
NOTES: Excerpted from letter to DA's parents.

A note to you before leaving Calcutta for Delhi and a week's stay before returning to Geneva. Have been in Bangladesh for a week as we endeavor to set in motion our big autumn campaign. And, in fact, so far, all does appear to be more or less on schedule which, in this part of the world, is wholly unbelievable as I doubt anything proceeds as scheduled if anyone indeed has ever thought of preparing a schedule.

It's surprising to see the changes which have taken place in Bangladesh in only six months. A few items are beginning to appear in stores, buildings are being constructed and increasing numbers of people are in the streets. An air of normalcy has begun to pervade altho the country is desperately poor and remains desperately poor. We inspected arrangements and some of the Pakistanis about to be flown back (five flights a day now) and found it all incredibly well run and relationships between officials and Pakistanis entirely cordial, if not outwardly sympathetic. This is a remarkable change in itself considering the events of only two years ago.

And, for once, not only have they had a plentiful monsoon but an exceptionally long one to the extent that the November rice crop will be the largest in history – a fact as yet given rather little publicity as I believe they fear that aid might abruptly terminate and indeed they need far more than rice!

And for smallpox, this has been an extraordinary help as the disease begins to die out during this period. Here, in West Bengal, they are having trouble now finding any active cases and the situation in Bangladesh is not too dissimilar. If we now strike hard with our surveillance teams to eliminate the few remaining foci, the coming season could see us nearing the end of the trail. There are many ifs yet but morale and enthusiasm are higher than they have ever been – more people than ever are working in the field and the governments now – with the new Director-General's strong backing – are giving it greater emphasis and priority.

But visiting this part of the world is for me an always depressing experience – dirt and filth such as one can hardly imagine – hordes of people at every turn and even far into the countryside – pavement dwellers with no permanent home – beggars on every side (some, we are told, having been deliberately mutilated) – broken down trucks and buses with a chronic shortage of spare parts – roads torn up for years as they endeavor to resurface with almost total manual labor. And, on and on – not sure how much energy and motivation I would have under these circumstances. Surprisingly, however, there are real efforts to maintain personal cleanliness and suitable clothing and, by and large, the people are reasonably cheerful and friendly.